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Revisiting 'Militancy': Examining Niger Delta

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Revisiting 'Militancy' and Control over Natural Resources - a case study of Niger Delta

Abstract: *This paper tells the stories based on empirical evidence in Niger delta. It reveals the process and structure of the conflict which started from the rights to self-determination and resource control by 'militant groups' in that region. We examine the narratives around this aspect in the words of dominant elites and 'militia activists', to argue that 'militia actions' that appear to challenge the legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state over control of natural resource (Oil), is embedded in complex web and porous boundary of informal and formal interactions with politicians and 'military' leaders. These provided the opportunity for the elites to maintain their control over oil and for some 'militia leaders' to bargain and negotiate with the authority often motivated by self-interest.*

Key Words: Oil, Niger Delta, 'militancy', protest, Africa

1. Introduction

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region in 1956 generated hope, expectations and opportunities to improve the welfare of local people. However, the reality is, national elites comprised of politicians and (former)military personnel, have been the principle beneficiaries of oil revenues in contrast to local communities who so far seen little or no benefits. In Nigeria, prior to the discovery of oil, exploration of natural resources was primarily controlled by the regional authorities. This later altered in a way (such as Land Use Act 1978; and Decree 13, 1996) that dispossessed local people from the rights to land ownership paving the grounds for *petro-capitalism*¹. This can be seen as one of the key factors for various aspects of grievances (Onuoha, 2005; Oluwanyi, 2010; Obi, 2009), and feeling of marginalisation among the local communities (Tamuno, 1970; Odukoya, 2006), particularly for the ethnic groups such as Ijaws and Ogonis. It is argued that such feelings of grievances and marginalisation have triggered the emergence of protests against the state (Watts, 2007; Omeje, 2005). Initially, the protests were non-violent but later adopted some violent character where the protesting groups engaged in bombing of oil pipelines, kidnapping of oil workers and confrontation with Nigerian military (Cuvelier, et al, 2014; Ukiwo, 2007). Conflicts generated from oil-governance policies, therefore, can be seen from multiple lenses. On the one hand, this may appear as rebellious actions

¹ Petro-capitalism describes a clientele networks of a few state political elites and multinational oil companies exercising monopoly over the exploration, management and resource benefits at the expense of local communities in Niger Delta (Watts, 2004).

where protesting groups are engaged in criminal activities for private gains, often described as 'militia'² activities in various (un)official narratives. On the other hand, this might appear to be the case where some groups are fighting for their 'rightful share' (Ferguson, 2015) expressing their grievances, frustrations, and resistance from a distorted livelihood and lack of participation in the oil/natural resource management.

In this paper, we investigate to what extent is the 'militia activities' in the Niger Delta a serious resistance movement that confronts the state power and seek to provide an alternative. We look into the conflict and the process of labelling³ 'militia activities' which started from the control and/or rights over the natural resources. We explore how the Nigerian state (along with petro-capitalist allies) still maintains its monopoly over oil governance, while the activities of these so called 'militia' groups,, to a large extent, remain unsuccessful in establishing their claim over the share/redistribution of natural resources. In doing so, we analyse the views expressed by some of the members of these groups who proclaim to be fighting for self-determination and rightful share/control over natural resources. The state has however, adopted various strategies to dissuade their activities including co-optation, amnesty and offering some form of political legitimacy where some 'militia' leaders are being brought to the negotiating tables in order to minimise the negative effects of conflicts. These strategies point towards the existence and functioning of assorted clientele networks among state, multinational companies (MNCs) and 'militia' leaders. Evidence presented here add to the existing scholarship by exploring the process/rationale behind the sustained nature of conflicts and their impacts on Nigeria's broader political economy with a particular focus on oil governance.

The structure of the paper is like this: the first section offers a background on conflict; oil governance and 'militia' resistance in Niger delta. This also reveals the dissatisfaction and frustrations of ethnic minorities that triggered 'militia' activities in the region. The second section offers empirical evidence collected from members of some 'militia' groups, key members of the rights groups and academics working on this issue. Empirical evidence was collected in between July 2010 and January 2011. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews was conducted through purposive sampling from seven specific sites across three states (Rivers, Bayelsa, and Cross Rivers States). Informed consents were obtained prior to the interviews and respondents' pseudonym have been used in presenting their views. The third section makes an analysis of the views represented in the interviews contrasting with the official and unofficial narratives of the state about 'militia' groups and the conflict. Through a critical lens, we focus

² The terms *militant* and *militancy* may mean different things to different readers/audiences. Interpretations of these terms are highly subjective. One might point to the common saying 'one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter'. Hence, in this work, we have used the related terms such as militants, militancy, and militia within inverted commas ('...').

³ We feel that it is important to understand who label whom and in what capacity. How this labelling gains normalcy as labelling refers to acts of valuation and judgement based on preconceived notions and perceptions of individuals or groups (Wood, 1985).

on the complexity of diverse interactions for creating/constructing intersubjective meanings expressed in these interviews where different narratives are being (re)produced for competing interests. We draw a conclusion in the final section.

2. An overview of Conflict, Oil governance, and Resistance/Militancy in Niger Delta

Oil and politics are inseparable in Nigeria. Oil wealth often influence and shape the structure of Nigeria's politics and economy. Its significance inform a contest for power and authority, where ethnic minorities who inhabit in oil bearing land continually seek to reassert claim to own land and oil under it. Resource laws such as the Land Use Act of 1978 and Decree 13, 1996, vested legitimate rights and authority over resource ownership in the federal government. Meaning the Nigerian State negotiates the terms and conditions for oil exploration with the multinational companies (MNCs). The dispossession of right to participate by local communities in oil extraction through the above mentioned Acts/Decrees reveal that the power chiefly lies with the state (along with military/political elites and the MNCs) – one key component behind the lingering conflict/'militia' activities in Niger Delta.

Historically, minority/ethnic groups have been living with fear of domination and feeling of political oppression in Niger Delta. This is evident from previous quests for regional autonomy and the struggles for political power amongst the minority groups of Nigeria further increasing the tension among majority-minority ethnic groups (Ukiwo, 2011). This had triggered the first 'militia' action in 1966 initiated by Isaac Adaka Boro, leader of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), and subsequent Biafra civil war in 1967. Both incidents threatened to secede as the Niger Delta Republic and the Biafra Republic, respectively. They seem to have spurred the forms of contemporary 'militia actions' which continues today. Moreover, the discovery of oil created localised perception political oppression, which enabled the NDVF's ideology of *self-determination* to start a process for contestation challenging the legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state over its governance oil. The military regime took no time in describing Adaka Boro/NDVF's action as 'militant activities' and imposed a number of political barriers (e.g. killing and imprisoning a large number of activists including Adaka Boro) to prevent the activities of protesting groups further. Nigeria's heterogeneous cultural diversity also contributes to the identity politics and plays crucial role in understanding socio-economic and political foundations of the Niger Delta conflict. It informs the unequal distribution of resources within ethnic groups engaged in the struggles for power and access to resource benefits. The history of resistances, therefore, can be traced back to pre-discovery of oil, such as, from the 1895 Akassa raid against British traders (Alagoa, 1960), to perceptions of marginalisation in the 1950's, Calabar Ogoja Rivers Movement (CORM), the armed rebellion of Adaka Boro in 1966, the Non-violent Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) of Ken-Saro Wiwa, and the contemporary Movement for Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) which morphed from the fallouts of the historical gathering of Ijaw Youths at Kaiama community in the early

1990s. This chronology of resistance/movements in the Niger Delta manifest the ongoing tensions among ethnic groups and the state - against the latter's monopoly over natural resource governance.

Given this context, the next section offers empirical evidence obtained from the members of so-called 'militant' groups in understanding their views on conflict/protest/violence. The significance of these views can be explained by the words of Wasser (2014), where he insists that violent campaigns originates from the nature of state engagements to non-violent processes. Violent conflicts in Niger Delta region are grounded in historical discontent of resource ownership (Ako, 2011). The demand for access to resource control offer a common platform for different 'militant' groups, who may share the common perceptions of exploitation and limited spaces for political participation. Thus, the porous boundaries of conflict, violence and politics inform the nature of state response to social mobilisation (Wood, 2015). They also shed new light in understanding the patterns of violence and repertoire of contention by various actors in Niger Delta.

3. Empirical evidences: Marginalisation, Political Oppression, protest and 'militancy' revisited

The feeling of being politically oppressed among the ethnic minorities seem to be a key component of the Niger Delta conflict. This was highlighted in the views offered by several interviewees. For instance Kowa⁴, locates protest/resistance by the 'militia groups' in response to political oppression before oil was first discovered in Nigeria. He explains that this set the context for struggles for political power in which minority groups were submerged under the regional authority of Eastern majority Igbos. According to Kowa:

"Militancy in the Niger Delta region is a combination of series of struggles, dating back to the Adaka Boro revolt [...] because of the injustice and minority status of the inhabitants of the region, we needed to be separated from Eastern region [...] These events existed before Oil came into prominence"

Before 1956, the constitutional provision stipulated a structure of regional autonomy that allowed 50 percent of resource benefits to regions, based on derivation principle. After Nigeria's independence in 1960, this was gradually reduced by the state accentuating the protest and resistance from the minority ethnic groups. The centralised structure of oil governance, amongst other features, spurred a struggle for power along the ethnic lines, and became evident in the nature of political party formations in the country⁵. Such structure of political party formations in the early 1960s, along with feeling of deprivation, informed the action of Adaka Boro and created an influence among other protesting groups in Niger Delta. Protest groups have been viewed as platforms of collective actions in which contemporary

⁴ A key informant/activist /academic researcher

⁵ For example, many ethnic groups in the North were affiliated to Northern People's Congress (NPC), the West had its Action Group and the Eastern had National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC).

'militias' appear to hinge on similar ideology of 'self-determination and resource control'. This was coherent with the views of Timidi⁶ who insisted that the lack of basic socio-economic amenities in communities spurred the resistance/conflict in the region. His response, like other 'militants', made reference to Adaka Boro and Ken Saro Wiwa⁷ as leaders who inspire much of current 'militia' actions. This also shows how past experience of exploitation can evoke contemporary collective action.

"We have been fighting for the course of the Niger Delta for years. People like Isaac Adaka Boro came on board, he died, and Ken Saro Wiwa came [...] you know we are the people that are feeding the whole country, but if you come to my community, there is no electricity, no road, no drinking water, nothing, and nothing"

Military rules, along with political oppression, further increased the tensions and violence in Niger Delta. From 1966 to Nigeria's first transition from military to democratic rule in 1979, the Delta witnessed series of sustained brutality and killings from Nigeria's military authorities. Non-violent protest/agitation which began as writing protest letters to oil company management to demonstrations against these companies often ended with the brute force of oil company securities, supported by the military regimes. Such instances eventually gave these protests some violent attributes as was illustrated in the aftermath of Ogele protest. The case of *Ogele procession* represents a key historical moment of state brutality as well as conscious awakening to resort to arms in defence of making claims for the legitimate rights (perceived by the protesting groups) over oil and other natural resources in Niger Delta. The following was described by Otuan⁸.

*"....We were protesting in a non-violent way. We carried placards and leaves without weapons or guns. But in all the protests to express our grievances, the federal **government would use military might, not police but the military might** [...] along the hospital road junction, some soldiers led by army Captain opened fire on us. They stood in three lines; the first group kneeled on the floor, other groups a little higher and others standing. They opened fire and four persons were killed. I personally carried a boy from Ogbia whose stomach was torn by bullet in wheelbarrow to a clinic nearby"* (emphasise original, expressed in interview)

The repercussion of the *Ogele* procession thus seem to have given a new meaning and understanding of protest amongst these groups, particularly the Ijaws. As Boas (2012) asserts that to stand against the repression of the state and pervasive culture of impunity, the local oil bearing communities engendered a shift from non-violent approach to violence. It induced a belief that to deal with state brutality violence

⁶ An active 'militia' in his 30s, unemployed school drop-out who joined a militia group

⁷ An environmental rights activist.

⁸ An activist of Niger Delta's human and social rights.

is not only necessary, but also an appropriate tool to carry on with. As Pato⁹ described it regarding the demands of Ijaw.

[...] “The picture we gathered from that moment is that government was not open to peaceful negotiation and resolution of the crisis [...] it is the introduction of violence by Ijaw youths that got attention from the government. The government does not believe in advocacy, so the process for advocacy have not helped the engagement of communities in the Niger Delta with the federal government”

The repression from state brutality as response to protest and agitations eventually led to arms confrontation as was also illustrated by Ololo¹⁰.

“We are fighting with the government to let them know about the Niger Delta situation [...] we cannot go to Abuja to fight them, so we have to destroy pipelines and embark on illegal bunkering business. The federal government got involved in Ogele and since then we started shooting at them too”

Between 2006 and July 2009, the coordinated attacks by ‘militant groups’ such as the MEND accounted for about 300 deaths and 119 oil workers being held hostage¹¹. The daily oil production also drastically reduced during this time, from 2.6 million barrels of oil per day to just 700,000 barrels per day¹². This was despite \$3 billion dollars annual spending by the federal government and oil companies on security to protect oil facilities in the region. No surprise the state and oil companies labelling these protests as ‘militant activities’. Furthermore, there have been efforts to buy-out different factions of these groups, bring them to negotiating table, offering them amnesty and spaces in mainstream politics. One such process is informal payments made by some governors to ‘militant’ leaders in the Niger Delta illustrating another important aspect that has helped the conflict and ‘militancy’ to continue. Payments like this serve a dual purpose. First, this provides state governors an opportunity to use his discretion to spend money from the treasury (generally without much question) to ‘buy peace’ through security votes and capitalise on the tension and insecurity. Second, this also offers political leaders a means to strengthen relations with key ‘militias’ for election times. However, such payments are often unevenly distributed among the ranks of ‘militia’ groups and might raise the question whether these groups are motivated by greed or grievances (Sutcliffe, 2012; Le Billion 2005; Watts, 2007; Cuvelier, et al, 2014). As Kavelli¹³ offered an insight about the payments made by the government to ‘militants’:

⁹ An activist of Niger Delta’s human and social rights.

¹⁰ An active member of one the local ‘militia’ groups.

¹¹ *Niger Delta Technical Committee Report, 2009.*

¹² Official records from Nigeria’s special adviser on amnesty for Niger Delta militants (Year of publication?).

¹³ An active member of one the local ‘militia’ groups.

“[...] Yes, it is the government that is paying our salaries while we are in Camp. These are secrets that I am telling you. It is the government that is paying! I have seen things, I cannot speak about [...] for the ordinary soldiers, they pay us 70,000 naira¹⁴ but we are the people taking the risks, we die for nothing. You see, I know the amount because my uncle receives a salary of 1.6 million naira¹⁵ from the government every month”.

The introduction of amnesty programme depicts the co-option process by the state and also draws attention to a shift in the ideology among the ‘militia’ groups. Amnesty programmes aim to bring the ‘militants’ into formal and informal structures of resource benefit, by opening up spaces for key ‘militia’ leaders to gain access to mainstream politics. This is elucidated in a media statement of MEND’s spokesperson Jomo Gbomo, who accused the Niger Delta Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee (NDPCRC) for using the health of the late President Yar Adua to delay talks in order to exploit the amnesty process and offer bribes to create factions among the ‘militant’ leaders¹⁶ (The Punch, 2009). This shows a fluid and cohesive clandestine network of patronage that help shaping and sustaining ‘militancy’ in the region. This also reveals a shift in the ideology of various protesting groups as succinctly explained by an interviewee who simply gave his name as Shine ya eye, during an interview:

“Can you imagine the MEND war-horse being hinged on an insignificant amnesty programme? I thought MEND fought for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta people. Everything has suddenly narrowed down to the amnesty allocation of agitation”.

A shift in the ideology seem to have frustrated some members of these groups, as an ex-militant ‘General’ was criticising fellow ‘militias’ for being greedy. His views¹⁷ clearly suggests that there must be some networks among the ‘militias’ and political elites, considering the high cost of establishing and maintaining a camp as well as the tangible and intangible resources needed for ‘militia’ movement to be successful.

¹⁴ About £270 pounds.

¹⁵ About £6,000 pounds.

¹⁶ According to Jomo Gbomo, Abbe (Nigeria’s Defence Minister) and his cohorts, members of the Niger Delta Peace and Conflict Reconciliation Committee (NDPCRC), instead of encouraging the presidency to address core issues as demanded by true agitators for justice in the Niger Delta, was busy inaugurating one dubious committee after another to continue stealing funds allocated for the development of the Niger Delta. He also claimed that the government has been offering bribes to militants who surrendered under the amnesty programme in the form of contracts. In another media comment accredited to a Joint Task Force (JTF) commander in the region it suggested that a close look at the Niger Delta situation today will reveal that some key former militant commanders and a few lucky apprentices are now well-established businessmen. They now live in splendour and affluence. The on-going rumble in the creeks has been orchestrated by former apprentice militants who feel left behind by their superiors (This Day, 2010).

¹⁷ Publish in This Day, newspaper report, 28 November, 2010.

“Fighting is not a poor man’s business. A man with just 10 million naira¹⁸ cannot go to the creeks because that amount cannot last beyond four days. So any person who wants to return to the creeks—that is the person’s decision; the return to the arms struggle cannot be one man’s decision. It has to be a decision taken by many other stakeholders in the region”.

4. Analysis

As can be seen from the empirical evidence presented above, a number of pertinent features such as minority status, political oppression, the labelling and meanings behind ‘militia’ action can be perceived as main reasons for continued violent conflict in Niger Delta region. These observations add to various narratives of conflict and labelling extending further whether so called ‘militia’ actions are motivated by greed or grievances, and how the claim for ‘rightful share’ are intricately dovetailed in this process. They also offer further insights about shifting ideologies among some ‘militia’ members/leaders. Identifying different mechanisms of co-option, political patronage and material benefits offered by various (in)formal actors also contribute to the political economy of resource governance. From a critical perspective, the Niger Delta region can be described as an arena of contested entitlements, a theatre of struggles where the politics of recognition are being played out. In this particular case, we reveal how the protests of the Ogonis and Ijaws shaped a particular form of resistance and collective action. It partly demonstrates the political opportunities or constraints for the success or failure of movements, and state capacity for repression. Also, the legislative laws of resource extraction have been central to the conflict surrounding the Ogonis and Ijaws, as well as other ethnic minorities of the delta. The narratives and meanings behind ‘militia’ action are socially constructed. Protesting groups were labelled or framed by the state/media in various ways, as oil thieves, criminals, kidnappers, cult gangs or restive youths. While ‘militants’, on the other hand, see themselves as freedom fighters, liberators or resource agitators. These labelling manifest a particular kind of reality with varied meanings and interpretations both at the individual and collective levels. The meaning of ‘militancy’, therefore, is not straightforward. They cannot be conceptualised within a binary framework of true or false, bandits/common criminals¹⁹ or freedom fighters. They are socially constructed within the narratives of the state, powerful elites and various other groups. This must be also noted that, for some ‘militia’, such activities can be an opportunity to make a living. As some members being recruited in ‘militia’ groups in the context of their desperation to survive (often indirectly paid by the state or other political sources), while others drift into ‘militant’ activities having become involved in oil theft, in order for their subsistence. Arguments presented here point towards the process that the labelling of insurgents under broad categorisation such as ‘common

¹⁸ £10,000 pounds.

¹⁹ According to (Sutcliffe, 2012), a petro-capitalist lens label these people as common criminals or bandits who significantly threatens Nigeria’s oil economy and fragile democracy.

criminals' can be misleading (Ballentine and Sherman, 2003), that ignores how livelihood strategies could intermix with politically motivated actions and can co-exist simultaneously (Watts, 2007). Moreover, some 'militant' leaders may appear to be driven by the potential to secure both material and political influence. The prospects for them to access oil benefits are intrinsically linked to the role of political elites and porous boundaries of patronage relationships which underlie the continuity of 'militancy' in the Niger Delta (Kew and Phillips, 2013). The rise in the number of militants from 150 in 1966 to 26, 356 by 2014²⁰, did not emerge out of spontaneous, frenzied mobilisation, but through a series of historical events within formal and informal structure, socio-political events and shared perceptions.

5 Conclusion

The Niger Delta conflict is rooted within the history and culture of resource governance in Nigeria. A decentralised structure and composition of the country, prior to its independence in 1960, enabled a regional autonomy over resource ownership. The discovery of oil in 1956, introduced a radical shift from pre-existing regional authority structure to a more centralised resource governance policies which dispossessed the rights of recognition, participation and ownership of local people in the oil governance. This feeling of political oppression, along with a perception of minority status, spurred a number of key protest groups followed by pockets of non-violent protests from communities that faced state brutality and repression under military regimes between 1966 and 2006. The state response to non-violent protest, subsequently led to the emergence of armed 'militia' groups, the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) in 2006. This paper unpacks how the complexities are informed by broader political-economy structure of resource governance in Nigeria through the voices of the 'militants'. We argue that unless we understand the significance and political dynamics of resource governance, we cannot understand the mobilising process and articulation of 'militancy' in the Niger Delta. Particularly, how it evolves within various networks of power relationships and social interactions over access to resource benefits. Whilst, the NDVF and MEND emerged to challenge the legitimacy and authority of state over oil governance, under an ideological platform of self-determination and resource control, the actions and activities of 'militant' groups over the time may have shifted from the framing of self-determination and resource control to personal interest/greed (at least for some). Thus we contend that the cognitive world of 'militants' and 'militancy' in the Niger Delta is embedded in a complex web of formal and informal interactions with political actors and military elites which give significance and sustenance of the conflict in the Niger Delta. Although contemporary 'militant groups' tend to legitimise their actions from previous actions of NDVF, their ambitions/motivation are consistently hidden under the notion of self-determination. As in many ways, this has been compromised because of some leaders' (or leaders of some factions) personal self-interest both in terms of political benefits or other

²⁰ The number was given by Special Adviser on Government run Amnesty Programme

material interests. The ideology of 'militants' that has changed over time is critical for understanding the process of mobilisation that gives conflict a more persisting nature. As illustrated in this paper, there are instances where ideology of 'militias' are strongly embedded in its historical origin (Adaka Boro and the Ogele procession). In other instances, the ideology tend to be weakened by negotiations between 'militia' leaders and political elites and/or MNCs. This reveals the porous boundaries of social and material transformation (exchange of guns for vote, money for pipeline protection, etc.) that enable some of them to gain status and wealth (Ako, 2011). Altogether these events nevertheless indicate that 'militants' have gained prominence within mainstream political structure of resource governance contrasting to the narratives of they are common criminals and bandits. This marriage between 'militant' leaders and politicians, serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, it provides the opportunity for some 'militias' to create their own praxis and 'governable' spaces in negotiating/bargaining with the state whatever they can get from oil revenue. While on the other hand, the national elites within this relationship maintain their control over oil by largely ignoring the demand of local population including ethnic minorities resulting in spreading/continuing the violence further for a prolonged period of time.

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